Alexander Farewell Speech — December 2, 2020

Over the years I've learned some lessons about making speeches

Mr. President, on March 9, 1967, Senator Howard H. Baker Jr., the newly elected senator from Tennessee, made his maiden address, his first speech on the floor of the United States Senate. He spoke for too long. The Republican Leader of the Senate, also Baker's father in law, Senator Everett M. Dirksen, walked over to congratulate him and then said, "Howard, occasionally you might enjoy the luxury of an unexpressed thought," which is good advice for a farewell address as well.

As Senator Baker's legislative assistant, I was also his speechwriter for that maiden address, or at least I thought I was. He developed a bad habit of not saying what I wrote for his speech, so I asked to see him and I said "do we have a problem with our relationship?" He said, "No, we have a perfect relationship. You write what you want to write and I will say what I want to say."

I learned a couple of other things about saying what I want to say. One came from Alex Haley, the author of "Roots" who heard me speak once and called me aside afterwards and said "may I make a suggestion?" He said "if when you begin a speech, you would start by saying 'instead of making a speech, let me tell you a story,' someone might actually listen to what you have to say."

And then from David Broder, who gave this advice to Ruth Marcus when she got her column for The Washington Post, "one idea per column."

The one idea for this speech

So here's a story about my one idea for this speech.

In August of 1968, Senator Baker was in the Republican Leader's office where Senator McConnell is today. He overheard this conversation: Senator Dirksen was saying "No, Mr. President, I cannot come down and have a drink with you tonight. I did that last night. And Louella is very unhappy with me."

About 30 minutes later there was a commotion out in the hall, and in the door of the Republican Leader's office came two beagles, three secret service men, and the President of the United States. And Lyndon Johnson said to Everett Dirksen, "if you won't come down and have a drink with me, I'm here to have one with you" and they disappeared into the back room.

Later that same year, around a long table in that same office, the Democratic President and the Republican Leader worked out the Civil Rights Act of 1968.

It took 67 votes to break a filibuster, but when the bill passed and Johnson signed it, the senators who voted no went home and said "It's the law. We have to accept it." And it still is today along with many other civil rights laws.

So that's the one idea I have for this speech.

Our country needs a United States Senate to work across party lines to force broad agreements on hard issues, creating laws that most of us have voted for and that a diverse country will accept.

In the 1930's we needed a Senate to create Social Security. After World War II, the United Nations, in the 60's, Medicare, in 1978, to ratify the Panama Canal Treaty.

In 2013, more recently, to tie interest rates for student loans, to the market rates, saving student borrowers hundreds of billions of dollars in the last several years.

In 2015, to fix No Child Left Behind. That bill had 100 alligators in the swamp. The Wall Street Journal said when we finished that it was the largest devolution of power from Washington to the states in 25 years. When President Obama signed it, he said it was a "Christmas miracle" because in the end 85 senators voted for it.

In 2016, as Senator McConnell mentioned, the 21st Century Cures Act, moving medical miracles faster into patients' cabinets and doctor's offices. That bill went off to track every two or three days. On one of those days I called the Vice President, Joe Biden, and I said "Joe, I'm stuck in the White House. I've got the president's personalized medicine in this. I've got your cancer moonshot, Senator McConnell's regenerative medicine proposal, Speaker Ryan worked out a way to pay for it. But I can't get the White House to move. I feel like the butler standing outside the Oval Office with a silver platter and nobody will open the door and take the order." And Joe Biden said, "If you want to feel like the butler, try being Vice President."

Well, in the next few weeks, the Senate rules literally forced us to come to an agreement, and in the end we almost all voted for it. Senator McConnell said then as he said today, it was the most important legislation of that congress. And today it is helping to create vaccines and treatments in record times.

In 2018, the once in a generation change in the copyright laws to help songwriters be fairly paid.

This year, the Great American Outdoors Act—everyone agrees that it's the most important outdoor environmental bill in 50 years.

All that took a long time, a lot of palavering, many amendments, many years. Too many years, civil rights advocates, students, patients, songwriters, conservationists would say. But the point was those bills didn't just pass. They passed by big margins. The country accepted them and they're going to be there for a long time.

And most of them were enacted during divided government, when the presidency and at least one body of Congress was of different political parties. That offers an opportunity to share the responsibility, or the blame, for doing hard things, like controlling the federal debt.

That's why our country needs a United States Senate, to thoughtfully and carefully and intentionally put country before partisanship and personal politics to force broad agreements on controversial issues that become laws that most of us will vote for and that a diverse country will accept.

TURNING *pluribus* INTO *unum*

Nearly 60 years ago, I traveled from my home in the mountains of Tennessee to New York University's law school in Manhattan on Washington Square. It was my first trip ever to New York City, and I had asked for a roommate whose background was as different from mine as possible.

One of those roommates turned out to be a tall skinny guy from New Jersey. When I would go to his home in New Jersey and spend the night—his mother, she was a seamstress, his dad was a contractor, they were Italian immigrants—his mother would become so concerned about my frayed collar on my one white dress shirt that she would turn it while I slept.

Years later, that roommate Paul Tagliabue, invited me to go to the Italian-American dinner here in Washington. They were bursting with pride for the Italian-American heritage at that dinner. Cheers for Scalia the Justice, and Pelosi the Congresswoman, and Stallone the actor, and for Tagliabue, the National Football League Commissioner.

But what struck me was as proud as they all were of their Italian heritage, they were most proud to say "we are all Americans."

Ken Burns, whose films tell the story of who we are, reminds us that the late Arthur Schlesinger once wrote that our country needs less "pluribus" and more "unum." That the fact that we have attracted people from everywhere in the world has made our country richer and stronger. But it is more important and a greater achievement that we've combined all of that diversity into one country.

That's why the motto above the presiding officer's desk is not one word "pluribus." It is "E Pluribus Unum," out of many one.

More than ever, our country needs a United States Senate to turn "pluribus" into "unum," to lead the American struggle to forge unity from diversity.

Another way to do it

Now, some advocate operating the Senate in a different way. End the filibuster. The senate's best known tradition.
In the movie, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," he calls it the right to talk your head off. Don't worry about party lines. Pass everything with a majority vote.

Presidents would like that. They've said so. They would get their way more easily if we allowed the passions to roar through the Senate like they roar through the House of Representatives.

So if the Democrats are in charge, we could abolish every Right to Work law, repeal all limits on abortion, and pass restrictions on guns. Very appealing—for the moment.

But what about if the train roars in the other direction? And Republicans say let's impose a Right to Work law on every state, and pro-life laws, and gun rights laws.

Is such back and forth and back and forth what we really want as a country? The framers didn't think so.

They created this cooling saucer for those passions that President Washington talked about and the filibuster, the right to talk your head off, is the preeminent tool we use to force broad agreements on tough issues that most of us will vote for and that the country can live with.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the remarkable young Frenchman who wandered through our country in 1831 and 1832 and who wrote the best book yet on Democracy in America saw two great dangers for our future. One, Russia. And two, the tyranny of the majority.

Ending the filibuster would destroy the impetus for forcing the broad agreements I've been talking about and it would unleash the tyranny of the majority to steamroll the rights of the minority.

A more effective Senate

Well, you may say the Senate isn't solving some big problems, and you would be right. We're not even voting on some big problems. Sometimes because the majority doesn't bring it up, and sometimes the minority obstructs.

If a carbon tax is a good idea, why aren't we voting on it?

If we want to help the DACA kids, were aren't we voting on it?

If federal debts are out of control, why aren't we voting on it?

It doesn't take a genius to figure out how to gum up the works in a body of 100 that operates mostly by unanimous consent.

But here's my different view of why we're here: It's hard to get here, it's hard to stay here, and while we're here we might as well try to accomplish something good for the country.

But it's hard to accomplish something if you don't vote on amendments. Lately the Senate has been like joining the Grand Ole Opry and not being allowed to sing.

It's a real waste of talent. Think about this body. Over the years we've had astronauts and former governors and Supreme Court law clerks, military heroes, turn-around C.E.Os, we even have one of us that ran the Olympics. A group of that much talent ought to accomplish a lot more.

What will change it?

And you don't have to eliminate the filibuster to accomplish a lot more, meaning restore the Senate to the time when it was working across party lines more often to solve big problems.

Not so long ago, the Senate worked Monday to Friday, considered hundreds of amendments, most votes were by majority, conferences worked out broad agreements.

That was under the existing rules. Let me say that again: that was under the existing rules.

So the Senate doesn't need a change of rules. It needs a change of behavior.

And the behavior to change first is to stop blocking each other's amendments. If you're against it, vote no. Why stop the entire body from even considering it?

Why join the Grand Ole Opry if you don't want to sing?

I guarantee you that if 15 to 20 Democrats and 15 to 20 Republicans decided they wanted to change that practice, they could do it.

This a been a great privilege for me

Now some governors don't like being a United States Senator. But not me. The jobs are different. Both jobs cause you to want to see an urgent need, develop a strategy to deal with it, and then try to persuade at least half the people you're right.

The governor's job is more like Moses. You say let's go this way. The senator's job, if you want to get something done, is more like a parade organizer. You pick the route, you recruit the marchers, you select the music. You even pick the drum majors sometimes. And then you march in the middle of the parade and hope it doesn't run off the road more than a half dozen times.

I love the traditions of the Senate, the hard marble floors, elaborate courtesies, Barry Black's prayers, scratching my name besides Howard Baker and Fred Thompson's name in this desk drawer.

I made a lot of friendships in the senate.

My best friendship began at a softball game between Senator John Tower's staff of Texas and Senator Baker's staff in 1967 when a 21-year-old Smith College graduate named Honey slid into first base wearing red shorts.

I was not only surprised, but captivated. And 18 months later we were married. And for 52 years she has been an unselfish and caring wife, mother, campaigner, advocate for families and children, especially her own.

In 1969, as the Leader mentioned, Senator Baker said to me, "you ought to get to know that smart, young legislative assistant for the new Kentucky senator Marlow Cook." That smart, young legislative assistant was Mitch McConnell, and it began a half-century of friendship.

Mario D'Angelo in the barber shop here first cut my hair in 1977 when I came up for three months to work for Senator Baker when he was suddenly elected Republican Leader.

Some of my experiences in the Senate haven't been so friendly, such as my confirmation hearing in 1991, when Senator Metzenbaum of Ohio said, "Governor Alexander, I've heard some very disturbing things about you, but I don't think I'll bring them up here." And he then put a hold on my nomination for two months until I was mysteriously confirmed late one night, and I still don't know how.

Back then, I found a new way to make friends among senators when I went to the republican retreat and they said, "Stop talking and play the piano and we'll support Bush's education program." So I did and they did.

I've strengthened friendships in the so-called "inner sanctum" that Chuck Schumer and I resurrected downstairs. It provides a private space for senators to have a snack and a conversation.

One-third of this body of the senators and their spouses have come to the Smoky Mountains to be our guests of Honey and me at our home for the weekend. We don't talk about politics much there. We talked about lost hikers and told bear stories.

And I've even learned here how to count. How to count my friends. In 2006, I wrote 27 thank you notes for 24 votes when I lost the race by one vote to be the Republican Whip.

Having learned to count, I got to be the Republican Conference Chairman. I enjoyed that, but nine years ago I left to focus on issues that I cared the most about. Since then I've done my breast to leave footprints that I hope are good for the country.

Fixing No Child Left Behind, and 21st Century Cures, and simplifying the FAFSA, working with Patty Murray, and Michael Bennet was there at the start for the FAFSA. Working with Dianne Feinstein building up our national laboratories and supercomputing. Joining the bipartisan parade of Portman and Warner and Gardner and King and Manchin and Daines and Heinrich and Burr and Cantwell that created the Great American Outdoors Act. The law to help songwriters. Working with Murray and Jones and Tim Scott on permanently funding Historically Black Colleges. With Blunt and Shelby on the Shark Tank and the NIH creating new COVID diagnostics tests. With Burr and Durbin and Manchin and King on the student loan law I mentioned. With Casey and Enzi on the Perkins Act. With Harry Reid and Bill Frist when they were leaders on the America COMPETES Act.

None of this could have been done without an exceptional staff, but instead of thanking them in a rushed way now, I'm going to make a separate salute to the staff speech tomorrow. Maybe I'll start a tradition.

My favorite time in the United States Senate has been with the American history teachers who I invite to come to the Senate floor before it opens while they are attending the Academies that were created by the legislation I introduced in my maiden address 18 years ago.

After that address, Ted Kennedy, without my knowing it, went around and got 20 Democratic cosponsors. In the House, Roger Wicker and Marsha Blackburn helped pass the bill where they were then. The teachers who come to the floor before we open invariably go to our desks, and try to find Daniel Webster's desk. They look for the Kennedy brothers' desk. They ask "where is Jefferson Davis' desk?" Because they've heard the story there is a chop mark on the desk that was imposed by a union soldier when they captured Washington and the soldier was chopping the desk until his commander said, "Stop that. We're here to save the union, not to destroy it."

Invariably a teacher will ask a senator, "What would you like for us to take back to our students about being a United States Senator?"

My reply is always the same: please suggest to your students that they look at Washington, D.C., as if it were a split-screen television. On one side are the confirmation hearings and the tweets. And on the other side you have Democratic and Republican Senators working together to strengthen national defense, national laboratories, national parks and the National Institutes of Health.

Please remind them of what a remarkable country this is. The strongest military, the best universities, producing 20% of all the money in the world for just 4% of the people.

Tell them we're not perfect, but as our constitution says, we're always working to form a more perfect union. As Samuel Huntington wrote, most of our arguments are about conflicts among

principles with which most of us agree. And most of our politics is about disappointments in not being able to reach the noble goals we set for ourselves, such as all men are created equal.

The late NAACP President Ben Hooks used to teach his University of Memphis students, “America is a work in progress. We've come a long way. We have a long way to go.”

Please remind your students that the rest of the world wishes they had our system of government and that the United States Senate has been and I hope continues to be, the single most important institution that helps to unify our country by creating broad agreements that most of us can vote for and that the citizens of the United States will accept.

And finally, please tell them that I wake up every day thinking I might be able to do something good to help our country, and that I go to bed most nights thinking that I have.

Please tell them that it's a great privilege to be a United States Senator. I yield the floor.

###